

LABORATOIRE DE PHYSICO-CHIMIE COLLOÏDALE

Route de Mende
MONTPELLIER
(Hérault)

Montpellier
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Professor Joshua Lederberg
Department of Genetics
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California

Dear Josh!

It has been a terribly long time since I began wanting to talk with you. I wished I could, as in former times, take a plane to come up to Stanford and be with you at least for a few hours. I am natively a bad letter writer, but lately even a first class letter writer would have had some trouble in my shoes. I had no doubt that I would meet with some difficulties during the initial period in Montpellier. This foresight turned out to have been very enlightened but the type of difficulties I actually met with were not those that I expected. For one thing, in the intervening years during my stay in the States, a trend, no doubt already present in France before I left, has become so accentuated that I did not feel I could put up with it; namely the trend, encouraged by the government, to increase the authority of a hierarchy of pure administrators to such an extent that the professional leaders in civil service are deprived of basic features of authority. This is particularly intolerable in scientific research. I have therefore started a campaign against our local CNRS administrator and, beyond his particular case, against the statute of administrators in government sponsored scientific research. Locally a modus vivendi that seems acceptable has been reached, although no fundamental change was granted. On the national scale the result of our campaign is yet to be felt. A second major difficulty that I met with here concerned laboratory space. I seem to have been successful in my attempts at getting a separate building built, although the final and official decisions are not yet in hand.

As to building up the laboratory, one aspect of it is to try to create a scientific milieu here that will make Montpellier scientifically livable, from the point of view of easily available professional contacts. One means of multiplying these contacts is to try to get here some American scientists to visit Montpellier for periods of various lengths. Some time ago Elie wrote me that he did not get along with Elliot and that

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for that reason he was determined to leave Stanford this spring, although he was not sure which of several possible jobs he would try to get. I wrote back that I would be absolutely delighted if he could come to Montpellier for a time, provided that this suggestion of mine would in no ways influence his decision concerning his ties with you at Stanford. Elie wrote back that he could give me every assurance that his decision to leave Stanford was irrevocable and that I could put my mind at rest with respect to my fears that I might in some sense divert him from your department. He also emphasized that nothing was changed in his personal relations with you and in his feelings toward you.

It turned out to be possible to have Elie invited by the Faculté de Sciences of Montpellier as a Professeur d'Echange for two months this late spring, beginning on May 1st. Only after this invitation was launched did I discover that I had misunderstood Elie and that his appointment at Stanford would normally have come to an end only by the end of June. I was erroneously under the impression that Elie had already moved out of the genetics department and had no more official duties in the department. By rereading his letters I see now that he did write me that he would be paid until the end of June, but what seems to have determined my impression and created the misunderstanding is that in the same letter he said that he no longer had any laboratory space and was working at home, ^{and at NASA Ames Center,} I was considerably upset to learn about this misunderstanding, since as things are I seem to be doing, to whatever slight degree, exactly what I of course considered the last thing to do, namely having anything to do with the time that Elie was connected with the genetics department. I must say that I find it extremely disagreeable to think that Elie has been offered here an appointment before his time with you had actually run out. Elie has recently written to me that there are some difficulties with the dates that were proposed to him by the Faculté de Sciences. From the point of view of the Faculté de Sciences the dates cannot be postponed on account of the fact that the school year comes to an end at the end of June. If it turned out that you had actually wanted Elie to be with you in May and June, I would never pardon myself to suggest a different solution and I would certainly propose that his appointment in Montpellier be called off for reasons of "force majeure". Please do let me know your true feelings about the matter!

How much I wished I had some hopes that someday, when we are through the "heroic period" of trying to build up a lab, and Montpellier has scientifically a little more to offer than right now, you and Esther might in turn accept to visit us here as visiting professors!

Recently I saw Piotr Slonimski who in the absence of Ephrussi ^{is} ~~is~~ directing the laboratory of Genetique Physiologique at Gif sur Yvette. To my great surprise I found out that he was in the process of feeding into a computer much the same kind of program for comparing polypeptide sequences as you ~~had~~ had done. I told him about our project in this connection. I feel that only a relatively small amount of supplementary work was required to reach some worthwhile result, especially with respect to the study of neighboring residues 1 to 4 positions removed from the reference residue. If I had not been scientifically incapacitated

by the task of setting up a lab and, first and foremost, improving the very basis for setting up a lab here, I would already have restudied your results and written to you about it. As matters stand, I wonder what you think we should do. I guess it would be in a way a pity to have put some effort into this work without bringing it to a fruitful point. If your impression coincides with mine that such a fruitful point might not be far off (it may do to feed a few more sequences into the computer), then would it not be advisable to quickly carry on the work and then get in touch with Slonimski, exchange our results, and decide about publishing either with Slonimski or separately?

So far I have been unable to contact Luca. But I intend to do so these days and to ask him whether I might conceivably pay him a short visit in Pavia between April 15 and 20th in order to discuss some questions of protein evolution.

Jane and I are sending you and Esther notre plus chaleureuse pensée!!

Emile

x

I just received a letter from Elie who tells me that, on account of a very important proof reading job, he now finds out that he cannot possibly make it to Montpellier for May. So the whole project collapses, and it remains to be seen whether it can be taken up again during the next academic year.